

# The Difficulties of Educating Children in Cambridge in the 19th Century

BY ENID PORTER

Many schools in the nineteenth century were overcrowded and the quality of teaching was so poor as to be virtually non-existent. They were run as profit making concerns with little regard to the welfare of the pupils.

In our January issue we start a series of articles on local schools and the facilities and opportunities they provide, both in the private and state fields. It is opportune therefore for Enid Porter to take us back one hundred and forty years to the problems then facing Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Nix of Somersham in educating their young son.

**THERE** were a number of private schools, of varying quality, in Cambridge in the last century. To one of them, in Regent Street, Mr. Thomas Nix, a well-known Non-conformist Landowner of Holyrood House in Somersham Fen, sent his small son Thomas as a boarder in May, 1829.

Mrs. Nix was naturally anxious to know how her little boy settled down in his new surroundings, so on May 13th the headmaster's wife, Mrs. Edmonds, sent her a reassuring letter.

I promised to take an early opportunity of letting you know how your little boy bore his separation from you and I am happy to say he is quite well and as happy as he could be at home.

Thomas, she reported, thought that he should have come to the School three years earlier, but "he thinks that in five years he will be in the first class."

Before the end of the Christmas term, however, the boy was apparently absent from school, having been sent home because he was suffering from what may well have been ringworm. On December 17th the headmaster wrote to Mr. Nix to enquire after Thomas's health and to express the hope

... that long before this time he has lost all appearance of the complaint in his head. I am happy to say we have had no appearance of it in the School since he left, and sincerely hope we shall see nothing of it again.

School would re-open on January 18th, 1830, when, wrote Mr. Edmonds,

... it will afford me and all of us much pleasure to see our young friend Thomas among us again . . . I shall find the greatest pleasure in paying him every attention with a view to his health and comfort and to advance him in his education.

## Epidemic of whooping cough

Thomas *did* return to the School, staying there until 1831. In August 1830 there was an epidemic of whooping cough in Cambridge, so Mr. Edmonds wrote to Mr. Nix warning him of the outbreak and telling him that "one or two of our young gentlemen have got it." He did not know if Thomas has ever had the complaint; it was highly probable that if he had not he would catch it now, but

he could not have it at a better time than now, and those who have it are very well in other respects, and play about as usual, and should he have it Mrs. Edmonds would pay him every attention that is necessary while it continues . . . I ought to say that the two young gentlemen who have the whooping cough are day pupils and attend to their lessons in a room by themselves.

The illness, it seems, was not allowed to be an excuse for absence from school!

It was usual in many 19th century Schools for pupils to write home at the end of each term to announce the date of their return for the approaching holidays and, generally, to express the pious hope that their parents would approve of the progress made by their offspring. Three of such letters sent by Thomas Nix from his Cambridge school survive. They are beautifully written — indeed the letters were probably copied as an exercise to demonstrate the School's tuition in the fine copper-plate calligraphy so popular at that time. They are formally worded, being addressed to "My dear Parents" and signed by "Your Affectionate Son, T. Nix."

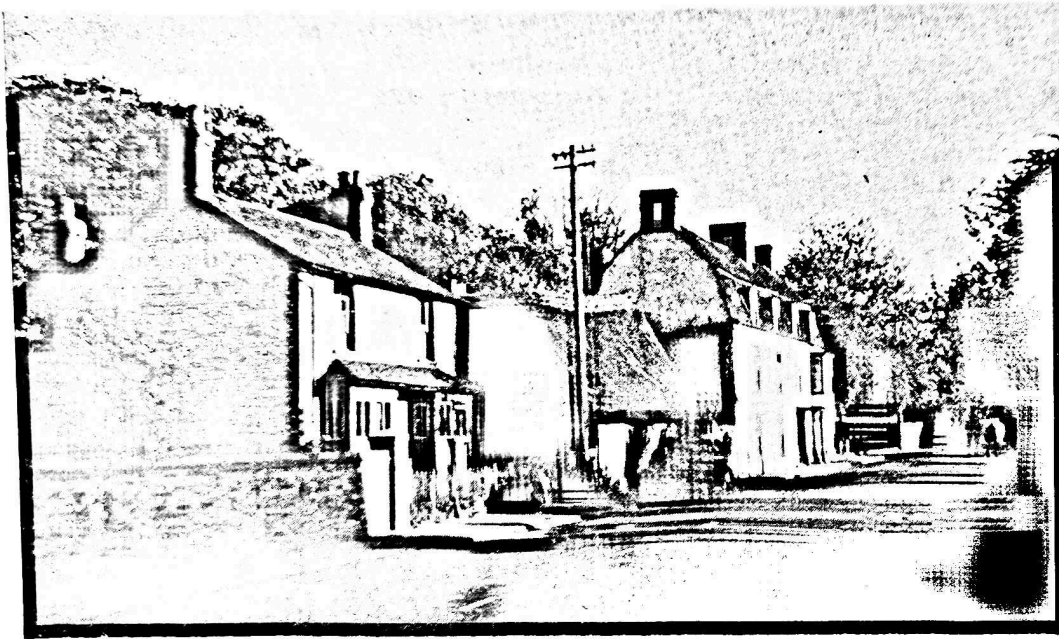
At the end of the summer term 1831 Thomas left Mr. Edmond's School and went, in August, to one in Melbourn owned by William Crole Carver whose father was minister of the Congregational chapel in the village from 1791 until 1825. The school took 90 boys, mostly sons of well-known Non-conformists. Among its pupils was John Morley, later Viscount Morley of Blackburn who, in 1865, laid the foundation stone of the new Congregational chapel in Melbourn. Morley's biographer describes the school as "excellent in every respect, the best of its kind in the country." The 3-storeyed schoolhouse stood in the High Street and was later occupied by doctors until it was pulled down for the building of the Greenbanks estate.

Several letters from Mr. Carver to Thomas Nix's parents

little interrupted by a cold or influenza with which nearly half of us have been affected. He is now pretty well again, nor has he been *ill*, having had the attack much less severely than many of us.

The headmaster thanked Mr. Nix for "his liberality and kindness, we dined in the Hare yesterday and all, including your son, much enjoyed it." How far, one wonders, did one have to go among so many schoolboys!

As at his Cambridge school Thomas sent neat, formal letters to his parents at the end of each term, signing himself "Your Dutiful Son." When writing home less officially his writing is less good and his spelling less accurate. In March 1832, for example, he sent a request for "some money to buy some wickets send me my large bat and ball"



*William Carver's school in Melbourn which took 90 boys. The three storeyed schoolhouse stood in the High Street until it was pulled down for the building of the Greenbanks estate.*

and from Thomas himself are preserved, along with those from Mr. Edmonds' School, in the Cambridge Folk Museum. Soon after the boy's arrival at his new School, William Carver wrote to Mr. Nix to assure him of his "dear little boy's" safety and health:

His spirits have been most excellent, and his health uninterrupted until yesterday, when he complained of a little headache which was soon removed by a little gentle medicine . . . We find him a very tractable, well-behaved, and amiable child, and though extremely backward I have no doubt but that, in due time, he will make satisfactory improvement. He requires me to say that he should very much like a cake and a letter.

### **Not ill, he has just had the "flu."**

In February 1832 Mr. Nix was informed in a letter from William Carver that Thomas was as happy as you could desire, but his health has been a

and added a pleading postscript: "send it as soon as you can. Send it in a parcell directed to me."

The cost of Thomas Nix's education at Melbourn can be gathered from a surviving school bill for the term ending at Christmas 1831. Board and Instruction for boys under 12 years of age was £21, but there were many extras which had to be paid for. Dancing lessons, for example, cost £2-7-3d. a term, the use of the Library 2/6d., a seat in the Chapel, 4/-. Copy books, quills, paper, pencils and books amounted to 15/-; one shilling was charged for a slate and sixpence for an inkstand: A puzzling item on the bill is 21/- for Tea; whether this was an extra meal or an extra drink is impossible to tell. Shoe-mending and cleaning cost 8/6d; mending 3/-; washing 21/-. In all, Thomas's first term's bill amounted to £30-7-1d., two guineas of this being the charge for "a separate bed." This gives some idea of the overcrowding which must have existed in many private boarding schools in the past, and explains, perhaps, how 90 boys could be accommodated in what was really no more than a large family house.